THE UTILITY GARDEN

Eyre, Frank

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THE UTILITY GARDEN
by Frank Eyre

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No two gardeners entirely agree; I am no expert and I shall not presume to advise. As a gardener of twenty years' experience, twelve of these years having been spent in the ranks of the blind, I shall endeavour in these articles merely to tell what I do and when and how.

This month of May is none too merry yet and I am glad my crops are not so precious as to have suffered when a white frost was revealed when morning dawned. It seldom pays to be in a hurry. Ground frost will not hurt the seed, however, and I shall sow more dwarf French Beans at intervals. Last year this crop was positively embarrassing in its abundance, and it is well to provide for a long succession of tender pods. In well dug soil I take out a trench and dig in some manure, then I press the seed in with finger and thumb, cover it up and gently press the surface over it. It is wasteful to sow French beans as one sows peas and then thin out the plants; they will all germinate and I am sure of complete rows in a double line, each plant four inches apart and just enough room between the rows to tread when I go weeding an gathering the beans. Runner beans, too, like rich deep soil. Preparing the place for them takes a time, the sowing of the seed is soon done. I put the beans six inches apart in two rows, a foot or more between them. When the plants are ready to climb I shall put the poles for their accommodation. This is a job that should be done with the thought intent upon the havoc that gales may play if these poles are not firmly founded. I tie each pole to one placed laterally five feet high, and then when this screen of poles is eavenly and hopefully complete I dig along where I have been treading. Runner beans will crop till the autumn frosts kill them, provided the pods are gathered regularly and not allowed to become old.

Beets will soon be big enough to handle. I shall then patiently thin out the plants just enough to let each stand singly. When the root is as big as a golf ball I shall think them again and the housewives will appreciate the tender young beets that will cook so quickly. The others will go on to maturity and in the autumn I shall store them in a clamp in boxes with dry soil. I find the round or Egyptian oval beet the most serviceable. The ladies like them better than the long roots for cooking purposes. This crop is one that must be protected from the birds. If no precaution is taken the sparrows will eat the heart out of every seedling.

When sowing I place little sticks along the drills at short intervals and attach black thread from stick to stick. Onions sown last autumn are now transplanted and beginning to grow strongly. To get big onions I find one must rely upon plants that have been standing all the winter. In my district spring sown onions are woth growing only for use as young stuff in the salads. Onions will seldom lose, that is, run to seed prematurely, if they are transplanted into soil richer and firmer than the seed beds from which they are taken. Although one may hate the vegetable marrow oneself they are worth growing for sale, and there is pleasure in observing their luxuriant growth. The plants are coming along nicely in boxes in the cold frame. I shall dig a hole in the place already prepared for marrows, put a liberal lump of dung in the hole and put a stick XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX where the plant is to stand. But I shall not hurry the transplanting till there is no longer a risk of frost; I shall try to get them out when there is a chance of rain. Watering artificially is work that should be avoided except in the very last resort. The tyro thinks that the focus of all gardening is a watering can and with excellent intentions and much labour he does more harm than good.

It is well to be prepared with a complete celery trench so that the plants can be got in as soon as they are big enough and when the weather is damp. Celery will never recover from a check in growth. Lettuce can be planted out now; I find it well to avoid the temptation to prick out the plants irrespective of their relative excellence. There are literally thousands of seedlings to choose from, so why trouble to coddle the weaklings.

Wallflowers are now a great delight. Sown last summer and transplanted in the autumn, I have hundreds of blossoming plants in rows. These I grow for cutting and not for decorative effects. Their scent however is just as glorious in the kitchen garden as elsewhere. Wallflowers do best of the soil is made rich. It is a good plan, too, when transplanting to pinch out the end of the main tap root and to pinch out the top of the plant when it is established. This makes the growth "stocky" and improves the quality of the bloom.

Carrots, parsnips, turnips and broad beans need only to be kept clean at this stage. If you get someone to plow the hoe between the rows on dry days it will do infinite good. But the blind gardener should be self-reliant, and my own method of achieving the benefit derived by hoeing is to use a short hand tool, the three-clawed "cultivator". It is back-aching work, but in Sussex we say "You can ache, old back, I be going to keep on working".

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